# Mark Twain on Writing

After touring St. Paul's Cathedral during a trip to London in 1872, Mark Twain jotted this fervent response in his notebook: "Expression--expression is the thing in art. I do not care what it expresses, and I cannot tell, generally, but expression is what I worship, it is what I glory in, with all my impetuous nature."

As his readers are well aware, Twain also gloried in expressing *himself* through language. And throughout his life, this master stylist had much to say about the art of writing.

* **On the Best Time to Start Writing**  
  The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is that you really want to say.  
  (*Mark Twain's Notebook*, 1902-1903)
* **On Getting the Right Word in the Right Place**  
  To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement. To condense the diffused light of a page of thought into the luminous flash of a single sentence, is worthy to rank as a prize composition just by itself. . . . Anybody can have ideas--the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph.  
  (Letter to Emeline Beach, February 1868)
* **On Good Grammar**  
  I like the exact word, and clarity of statement, and here and there a touch of good grammar for picturesqueness.  
  (*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 1924)
* **On the Rules of Grammar**  
  I am almost sure by witness of my ear, but cannot be positive, for I know grammar by ear only, not by note, not by the rules. A generation ago I knew the rules--knew them by heart, word for word, though not their meanings--and I still know one of them: the one which says--but never mind, it will come back to me presently.  
  (*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 1924)
* **On Style and Matter**  
  Great books are weighed and measured by their style and matter, and not the trimmings and shadings of their grammar.  
  (Speech at the Annual Reunion of the Army and Navy Club of Connecticut, April 1887)
* **On Writers Who Favor Foreign Phrases**  
  They know a *word* here and there, of a foreign language, and these they are continually peppering into their literature, with a pretense of knowing that language--what excuse can they offer? The foreign words and phrases that they use have their exact equivalent in a nobler language--English; yet they think they "adorn their page" when they say *Strasse* for street, and *Bahnhof* for railway station, and so on--flaunting these fluttering rags of poverty in the reader's face and imagining he will be ass enough to take them for the sign of untold riches held in reserve.  
  (*A Tramp Abroad*, 1880)
* **On Revising**  
  You need not expect to get your book right the first time. Go to work and revamp or rewrite it. God only exhibits his thunder and lightning at intervals, and so they always command attention. These are God's adjectives. You thunder and lightning too much; the reader ceases to get under the bed, by and by.  
  (Letter to Orion Clemens, March 1878)
* **On Adjectives**  
  As to the Adjective: when in doubt, strike it out.  
  (*Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 1894)
* **On Verbosity**  
  I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English--it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them--then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice."  
  (Letter to D. W. Bowser, March 1880)